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Dental Implants in One Hour! -- Research Summary

BACKGROUND: About 22 million people in the United States have dentures or no teeth at all. Dental implants can offer a welcome alternative for those who want to regain their smile. The first modern dental implants hit the scene in the 1950s, and they've improved quite a bit over the years.

Dental implants provide a base for replacement teeth that look and function like natural teeth. The implants are tiny titanium posts that are surgically placed into the jawbone where teeth are missing. The bone grows to the titanium, creating a strong foundation for artificial teeth. According to the American Dental Association, the number of implants placed by dentists increased 49 percent between 1995 and 1999.

STANDARD IMPLANTS: Typically, dental implants are done in two surgical procedures. The dentist will have to refract (peel back) the gum tissue to see just where the implants will go to avoid sensitive nerves. When the proper placement is decided, the dentist will then place the implants into the jawbone. For the first three to six months following that surgery, the implants, which are just below the surface of the gums, bond with the jawbone. While the implants are bonding with the jawbone, new replacement teeth are made by the dentist. When the implants are fully bonded with the jawbone (again, a process that takes up to six months), the dentist is ready to fit the new teeth. The second procedure you undergo includes uncovering the implants and attaching the posts that act as anchors for the artificial teeth. The teeth are then attached to those posts. The entire process takes up to nine months to complete.

NOW, FASTER, EASIER IMPLANTS: Now, dentists are offering an innovative way to give you dental implants and teeth in a one-hour office visit. At an initial patient visit, doctors take a 3-D image of the patient's jaw using an iCAT machine. When used with new computer software, the images show dentists the exact anatomy of the patient's jaw without ever having to look in the patient's mouth. Dentists can plan the surgery with pinpoint accuracy using these images and eliminate any potential problems before the patient even arrives at the office for the procedure.

Abraham Ingber, DDS, from The Washington Center for Image Dentistry in Bethesda, Md., says, "The iCAT 3-D X-rays are like using GPS as opposed to stopping and asking for directions." The technology eliminates the need for dentists to refract gum tissue to see the patient's jaw, which is a painful process. As doctors are planning this "virtual" surgery, a laboratory molds the replacement teeth. Dr. Ingber says the implants should last for life, but if the actual replacement tooth is chipped or cracked, it may need to be replaced in the future.

The surgery is also unique as dentists insert the implant directly through the gums to anchor it to the bone. Most procedures are done by cutting open the gums. No cutting means less trauma and less pain for the patient. When the patient comes for their implants, it takes about an hour to insert the implants and attach the teeth. Dr. Ingber says: "This is revolutionary. This is one of the most innovative breakthroughs to come along in dentistry in a long time."

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